

Filling the Gaps on Your Legal Resume

By Karen Anderson

If you are working on your legal resume, chances are you are looking for a job. Although the best time to look for a job is when you are still in your current job, in this economy that may not be likely. If you are sending your legal resume while you are currently unemployed, are you filling the gaps?

Most attorneys simply don't fill the gaps on their legal resume. At best, they provide the end date of their employment and send out their legal resume "as-is." That's a mistake. Whether the gap is created when a candidate is no longer employed by his or her former employer, or because of unaccounted time between jobs, these gaps need to be addressed.

Should I Provide An Explanation If I Am Currently Unemployed?

If you are currently unemployed, you need to provide potential employers an explanation of your current status. In this market, legal employers are flooded with legal resumes, many of which come from attorneys who are currently employed. When given the choice between a currently employed attorney and an unemployed attorney, which legal resume do you think the legal employer will focus on?

You need to make the pendulum swing back your way. In order to do this, you need to explain to potential employers why your last employer no longer employs you. The last thing you want a potential employer to do is guess the reasons for your unemployment. They will likely assume the worst.

If you were laid off because of a reduction in force, a restructuring, a bankruptcy, a merger, or other circumstances that were outside of your control, you must state this clearly on your legal resume. You do not need to provide a lengthy explanation. One line will suffice. The key is to let a potential employer know that your current unemployment status was not related to your performance, but rather to outside factors that were out of your control.

Where Should I Provide My Unemployment Explanation?

You have two options available: on your legal resume or in your legal cover letter. The most obvious, and probably the most effective method is to provide the explanation directly onto your legal resume. This is the document a potential employer will spend the most time reviewing, and the document that will most likely be circulated amongst the decision makers.

You should include the explanation either immediately following the short company or law firm description, or immediately prior to your first paragraph or bullet. The explanation should be no more than one line. Keep it short and simple.

Your legal cover letter is another option. You do run the risk that a potential employer will not read the cover letter, or not circulate it to other decision makers. However, if you decide to include it in your legal cover letter follow the same rule. Keep it to no more than one line.

What If I Was Fired From My Last Job?

If you were fired from your last job, you should still address this fact with a potential employer. Again, when you are looking for employment, you need to provide full disclosure as to everything that pertains to your professional background. An employer will not hire you without doing the required due diligence, including looking into your employment history. You do not want to waste anyone's time, or damage potential relationships because of misrepresentations.

You should address the circumstances that led to your discharge in your legal cover letter. This is too complex and sensitive to be included in just one line on your resume. You need to provide a fuller explanation. This should include why you were fired, and what you have done or learned from the experience to ensure that it will never happen again.

While explaining why you were fired is not an easy thing to do, try to keep your explanation factual, leave out the emotions, and avoid badmouthing your former employer. More importantly, you need to demonstrate that you have learned from the experience and have addressed the issues that led to your discharge. You need to make the explanation accurate, clear, and succinct.

What About Gaps In My Employment History?

If you have gaps in your employment history, no matter the length of the gap, you should definitely address them. As with your employment status, you do not want a potential employer to guess the reasons behind the gaps in your legal resume.

Whenever possible, you should address these gaps directly onto your legal resume. For example, if you were part of a practice group recruited from one firm to another and there is a six-week gap between firms, state it in one line of text under the firm you eventually joined. If the gap is longer than a few weeks and you were unemployed for any length of time, you may want to include this in a special section of your legal resume, assuming you were engaged in some form of professional activity.

If you have a long resume gap that is due to family or personal circumstances, you should consider describing these gaps in your cover letter instead. You should provide a couple of lines to describe the reason behind the gap. Again, there is no need to provide a full explanation; short and to the point is the preferred approach.

Conclusion

Before you send out your legal resume to potential employers, you need to make sure that any gap in your resume has an explanation that covers the circumstances behind the gap. The best policy with potential employers is full disclosure. You should always avoid letting a potential employer guess as to anything pertaining to your professional background. Whether you choose to include your explanation directly onto your resume or in your cover letter, remember to keep it short, factual, and to the point.